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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 002968

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, AND INR/AA  
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER  
CJTF-HOA AND USCENTCOM FOR POLAD

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: UNMEE MILITARY OBSERVER REPORTS ETHIOPIA  
INCREASING MILITARY READINESS

Classified By: Political Officer Ted Harkema for Reasons 1.4 (B)(D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. On September 27 Poloff met with an Amcit United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) military observer (Milob) to discuss the military situation along the Ethiopian-Eritrean border and report on Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) activity. According to the milob, Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General Azouz Ennifar does not believe Ethiopia will initiate war because of the financial costs, but UNMEE military staff disagree and assess that Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles would not allow the international community or the cost to prevent him from taking action he felt was in Ethiopia's national interest. The Milob said UNMEE further assessed the Ethiopian military is ready for any contingency and reports the military has increased readiness since the September 6-7 Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) meeting at The Hague. UNMEE is reviewing evacuation plans and procedures after ENDF Chief of General Staff Samora recently advised UNMEE to consider the need to move away from the border. The Milob reports that the ENDF obstructs UNMEE military observer patrols on a daily basis, and UNMEE has detected an increase in firefights along the border between regular army units on both sides including two skirmishes the week of September 16.

In addition, ENDF units have begun conducting daily live fire exercises near the border in the last month. UNMEE remains vigilant for signs of imminent conflict, but cautions the Ethiopian military could move with little warning in the event of war. END SUMMARY.

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ENDF INTENT UNCLEAR BUT READY FOR ANY CONTINGENCY  
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2. (C) The Milob stated Ennifar does not believe Ethiopia will initiate war because of the potential economic repercussions, but UNMEE's military staff disagrees and assesses the Ethiopian government is not concerned about the reaction from the international community or the potential costs. UNMEE staff do not have specific information that Ethiopia is intending to initiate war, but they note a discernible increase in readiness and activity across the border since the September 6-7 EEBC meeting at The Hague. Just prior to the EEBC meeting, the military held an army-wide general staff meeting. UNMEE staff assess the ENDF is ready for any contingency and note the senior ENDF leadership along the border appears ready and willing to go to war. The Milob emphasized that ENDF officers appear to be

losing patience with the status quo versus Eritrea. He also reported that the military is rotating units out of Somalia who have recent combat experience to front echelon positions along the border and that all Ethiopian surface-to-air missile sites near the border were now operational.

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UNMEE REVIEWING EVACUATION PLANS  
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¶3. (C) UNMEE last week initiated a mission-wide review of evacuation plans and procedures prompted by a conversation the week of Sept 16 with ENDF Chief of General Staff General Samora Yonus. During the meeting Samora advised Ennifar that UNMEE needed to start thinking about moving away from the border. Ennifar queried whether this was official notification to withdraw, but Samora replied no, "but you need to start thinking about it." Samora also claimed that if war started, "I will not be stopped short," and, "I will crush them."

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ENDF OBSTRUCTING UNMEE ON A DAILY BASIS  
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¶4. (C) The Milob reported that the ENDF obstructs UNMEE patrols on a daily basis using various tactics. In most cases he said ENDF forces block UNMEE movement in the field at random locations and demand the patrol leave the area. In other cases ENDF commanders use the explanation of "troop rotations" as cover for troop build ups in strategic areas. UNMEE is not allowed to patrol after dark when milobs frequently report hearing heavy vehicle movement along the

ADDIS ABAB 00002968 002 OF 002

roads and wake up to find ENDF units missing from their previous deployment sites. ENDF commanders consistently refuse to answer milob questions about the movement of ENDF units or military activity in an area. In one recent instance when UNMEE milobs arrived at an Ethiopian surface-to-air missile site near Axum an hour ahead of schedule, when the ENDF was operating an unmanned aerial vehicle from the airfield, the patrol was surrounded at gunpoint and told by the senior most ENDF officer present he would kill them if they returned to the area again. The Milob relayed that on the Ethiopian side of the border UNMEE is only allowed to patrol and report on Ethiopian military activity within the 15 kilometer adjacent area to the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ), but most Ethiopian forces along the border are deployed outside this narrow corridor allowing ENDF units to move more easily without being observed.

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SHOOTING INCIDENTS INCREASING ALONG THE BORDER  
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¶5. (C) The Milob noted shooting incidents had been increasing along the border in recent months, particularly between Ethiopian and Eritrean regular army units rather than between militias, but that both sides were deliberately refusing to publicize the skirmishes. He reported during the week of September 16 UNMEE detected two small firefights resulting in at least one ENDF casualty shot in the leg. UNMEE could not identify who initiated the skirmishes.

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ENDF CONDUCTING DAILY LIVEFIRE EXERCISES  
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¶6. (C) The ENDF has been conducting daily livefire exercises along the border in the last month, according to UNMEE. In addition, the Ethiopian SU-27 fighter aircraft at Mekele have been flying training missions on a near daily basis. The Milob underscored that in both cases, this activity was an increase from previous months.

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UNMEE WATCHFUL FOR INDICATORS OF IMMINENT CONFLICT  
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17. (C) The Milob reported UNMEE is watching carefully for signs of imminent conflict, but he noted the Ethiopian military repositioned most of its heavy weapons prior to the rainy season and would not need to conduct a major redeployment prior to initiating offensive action. He also noted the ENDF is capable of moving quickly, citing an example last fall when the army loaded and redeployed an armored division in less than a day. He further cautioned UNMEE has been unable to locate this division, but they believe it is now deployed somewhere between the Sitona Triangle and Humera. In particular, UNMEE is watching the large Ethiopian military hospital near Adi Hageray which is now in caretaker status. Milob asserted the activation of this hospital would be a clear sign of impending war.

18. (C) COMMENT. UNMEE, which has historically downplayed the military situation along the border, now classifies the TSZ and adjacent area as "volatile and tense" highlighting

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the seriousness of the military standoff between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Although the intent of the two parties remains unclear, the potential for miscalculation by either side remains high. Both sides have a history of reading each other's actions in the worst light, and tension will almost certainly increase further as the November 27 EEBC demarcation by coordinates date approaches. Post will continue to impress upon Ethiopian government officials at the highest levels that war is not an acceptable option and restraint must be exercised to avoid conflict. END COMMENT.  
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